

## ARK &amp; TENT



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**KENYA'S OSERIAN***A "Place of Peace" in Africa's Rift Valley***Text and Photos by Skip Kaltenheuser**

In the tribal language of the Masai, *Oserian* translates to a "place of peace." But that name is also synonymous with one of the most intriguing and profitable private enterprises in Africa, and a business model that strives to find ways to give back to the local community.

Oserian, in the business sense, is a Kenyan cut-flower growing and export operation that was begun by a Dutch family in 1982, currently operated by June and Hans Swagger. Flowers are vital to Kenya, (it's the third-largest business

after tourism, and coffee and tea), and Oserian is the leader of the floricultural industry. Focused on roses, carnations, lisianthus and statice, every day one and a half-million of these stems are graded and packed in the world's largest stand-alone pack house, then flown to the UK and Holland.

Much of the Oserian carnation farm is hydroponic, utilizing careful water management; and as an offshoot to the farm, a beautiful wetland was created. Stocked with fish and plentiful with frogs, it incorporates three ponds and a gravel bed, catches rainfall, and purifies pack house runoff water before it's returned to the lake. Environmental programs include a nursery that supports indigenous, exotic and threatened species programs, and seedlings are donated to the local community.

But the Swaggers also have another environmental project under way: the 20,000-acre Oserian Wildlife Sanctuary. The sanctuary is bordered by the Mau Escarpment (a steep, forested rampart rising to 3,000 meters and running along the edge of the Rift), and by Hell's Gate Canyon National Park, from which game animals (enclosed within an electric fence and patrolled by rangers) pass safely to the lakefront and to several man-made watering holes.

All profits from the sanctuary's tourism



business go to conservation efforts and to supporting local folk. Tourists are wide ranged, and have included celebs like Jim Carrey and Danny De Vito. But despite the plush accommodations, the costs of staying there and participating in various activities are very reasonable, particularly considering it's less than a two-hour drive from Nairobi. Though a charter flight to the sanctuary's airstrip can be done in twenty minutes, many people visiting Kenya miss much of the feel of the country because they fly point-to-point; the drive to Oserian, therefore, provides a look at local life along the way, and spectacular views of the Rift Valley as well.

Guests at the Sanctuary often split their time between two resorts: Kiangazi House, located in a wildlife corridor next to the sanctuary, overlooks the Rift Valley, Lake Naivasha, and well-attended watering holes. It's built in a traditional style using local stone and timber, with a verandah, courtyard, private lounges, restaurant, bar and library, and many fireplaces. It features three bedrooms, and two additional bedrooms



are on the other side of the pool. Chui Lodge is within the sanctuary and is a repurposing of the original Zwagger home, now converted to the main lodge and restaurant. Staying at Chui is like sleeping in a giant art project as it features artwork by master carver John Onyango of the Luo tribe, which he created out of acacia, laleshwa and olive trees.

The eight attendant cottages are no less artful as they feature paintings on windows, king-size four-poster beds, handcrafted furniture, and cloth designs modeled after animal colors and patterns. Animals, including a family of warthogs, have their run of the grounds, while waterbuck antelopes come in at night - standing like ghosts in the starlight. As with Kiangazi House, the attendant landscaping is what you'd expect from a flower mogul entranced by plants.

The Sanctuary brought in endangered species from other areas of Kenya as well, including Grevy's zebra, Beisa oryx, and greater kudu. Predatory cats include leopard, cheetah, serval and caracal. Wildebeest and topi join the 45 species of mammal that also include hippo, dik-dik and spotted hyena. 300 bird species reside or pass through, including the world's biggest group of endangered grey-crested helmet-shrikes. Visitors have the pleasure of seeing the resident wildlife uninhibited by outside vehicles and safari buses that crowd up many area game parks.

A premiere conservation move at Oserian was the introduction of six white rhino. Following their successful breeding program, the total is now 13 - and with rhino populations across Africa being devastated by poachers (with most species facing certain extinction), a fifty-percent increase in population is nothing short of miraculous.



Both lodges offer a variety of activities including game drives, bush walks, champagne breakfasts, day trips to national parks, visits to the flower farm, horseback riding, boating and fishing. One experience you won't want to miss is when a boat guide buys a large fish from a fisherman, stuffs it with a plant so it floats, calls out to a fish eagle in a tree along the shore, and throws it from the boat. The fish eagle moves like lightning to grab the fish and carry it away, and with any

luck visitors will hear the bird's distinctive call which seems to hang in the air like the mournful cry of a lover's betrayal.

One of the most novel of game-watching activities involves a huge ostrich named



"Dirty Harry." The ostrich is legendary for both his stupidity and his amorous desire, which prompts him to do a mating dance to appeal to anything that's in his field of vision - including inanimate objects like boxes, or car floor mats. Watching Dirty Harry try to solicit the affections of a piece of carpeted fabric, it isn't hard to recall that an ostrich's brain is about the size of its eyeball...

Peace, as it turns out, can be a hard-earned commodity. But if you're lucky enough to make it to Oserian, you'll be certain to discover that it does exist at a flower farm north of Nairobi.

### **FAST FACTS**

***United States Embassy*** (information for Nairobi)

[www.nairobi.usembassy.gov](http://www.nairobi.usembassy.gov)

***Oserian Wildlife Sanctuary***

[www.oserianwildlife.com](http://www.oserianwildlife.com)

***Africa Adventure Company*** (an excellent booking company for African tours)

[www.africa-adventure.com](http://www.africa-adventure.com)

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